

Vermont Payment for Ecosystem Services and Soil Health Working Group

Summary of Meeting #22: February 15, 2022

More detailed information, including presentation slides and the meeting recording can be found at <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/pes>.

Introduction

The Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and Soil Health Working Group held its twenty-second meeting on February 15, 2022. The objectives of the meeting were for the receive updates from the soil health technical team, refresh and review the working group's focus and approaches to "whole farm" programs, review existing NRCS and state programs that incentivize agricultural practices on farms, learn about a whole farm approach from the Wild Farm Alliance (California), and discuss next steps.

Summary of discussion

Ryan Patch provided an overview of potential definitions of "agricultural practices" that could encapsulate Whole Farm practices. He highlighted that the agriculture and ecosystems subcommittee of the Vermont Climate Council outlined a list of programs across the state that compensate farmers for practices that support climate mitigation. He suggested that many of these practices could be considered agricultural practices, though they have a range of outcomes. Therefore, it could be argued that practices which improve soil health and agricultural lands in production could be regarded as agricultural practices.

Feedback from the Working Group was that the working group's legislative charge outlines a stepwise approach to surveying existing programs and resources, analyzing their strengths and weaknesses, and identifying gaps, and the Working Group should follow this approach in investigating Whole Farm approaches.

Maddie Kempner and Rebecca Maden provided an overview Wild Farming, one "Whole Farm" approach. The four principles of Wild Farming are

1. Soil is kept covered with plants
2. Flowers are present
3. Native trees and shrubs are part of the farm
4. Wildlife, from bees and birds to larger animals, are present

They highlighted that in addition to in-field and edge-of-field practices, whole farm practices feed into the indicators for the Working Group's intended outcomes (from its legislative charge). Slides from their presentation are available at <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/pes>.

The Working Group then heard from Tony Fleming, hydrogeologist at the Wild Farm Alliance (California), on their approaches to measuring Whole Farm practices. He provided an overview of the *biodiversity continuum* and suggested that each farm has a unique set of circumstances and will begin at a different place on the continuum (depending on its needs and capacities). He reviewed a series of on-farm case studies which demonstrate ways in which other farms are implementing practices and developing metrics to improve biodiversity on farms. He suggested that programs choose simple visual and sensory

indicators that farmers can easily gather, and auditors can easily verify. He also suggested that the way to gain the most from ecosystem services on the dollar is to embrace complexity by selecting the broadest possible menu of practices. This allows farmers to choose particular practices for their farms' needs and benefit from the complementary effects of multiple services and practices. He also recommended that supplementing other cost-share programs could be meaningful to farmers and would avoid "reinventing the wheel". Slides from the presentation, and a list of works cited, are available at <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/pes>.

The Working Group wrapped up by suggesting that the Working Group keep biodiversity and whole farm practices front-and-center. Members also suggested that a longer retreat could be useful in the near future to assess the Working Group's path forward.

Comments made during Public Comment period included a recommendation that the Working Group focus on its legislative charge and seek to understand where existing programs fall short and where gaps exist in order to understand what is accessible and what needs supplementation.

The meeting was adjourned at 2 PM.

Links shared during discussions

1. [Restoring the Balance: Prairie Conservation Strips \(STRIPS the Movie\)](#)
2. [Biodiversity Continuum Chart](#)
3. [USDA Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities webinar \(and recording\)](#)